



Doing What Works

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Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Professional Community Time

Waterford High School, California • June 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Improving Instruction

Highlights

- If a school defines its purpose as high levels of learning for all students, all practices can be examined in light of their effect on student learning.
- A culture of collaboration is inherently powerful, but must be focused on the right things for it to be productive.
- Higher-order thinking activities can improve student learning; these are easier to plan ahead of time than to incorporate “on the fly.”

About the Site

Waterford High School

Waterford, CA

Demographics

55% White

40% Hispanic

1% Asian

1% Black

46% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

13% English Language Learners

9% Special Education

Waterford High School had several components to its successful turnaround process:

- Collaborative agreement on the school's mission statement, which includes the school's vision, beliefs, and expected student outcomes
- Collaborative decision-making processes as part of creating new instructional norms for the school
- Use of a data-driven approach and collaboration among teachers in planning instruction

Full Transcript

Don Davis to staff: The CAHSEE [California High School Exit Exam] 2008 results are in, and we've been sharing the data with our math teachers, our language arts teachers, and some of our students, but I'd like to report that a new record established in mathematics. Ninety percent of the tenth graders took the test, passed it on their first attempt. A new record established in Language Arts this year. It wasn't on the pass rate. The pass rate was high but not a new record. But on their proficiency record: 65% proficiency, never that high before, maybe the highest in the county. So Language Arts teachers... [clapping].

The School Vision

At the beginning of the year, we had our retreat, and we reflected on some of our practices. And we are going to revisit these ideas in our professional community time today. High expectations for success will be judged not only by the initial staff beliefs and behaviors, but also by the organization's response when some students do not learn. If we accept high levels of learning for all students as the fundamental purpose of our school, and therefore are willing to examine all practices in light on their affect on student learning. This actually helped frame our new vision statement.

Collaboration

Here's a definition of collaboration that we find in the literature: a systematic process in which we work together, interdependently, to analyze and adapt professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results.

So, what strikes you about this definition? Are there aspects of it that you agree with it, or maybe are there things that you'd change, or that you need further clarification? The next question is—or statement—has to do with collaborative cultures, which by definition have close relationships, are indeed powerful, but unless they are focused on right things, they maybe end up being powerfully wrong. And if we make progress when we move from a language of complaint to a language of commitment, from a language of "they" to a language of "we," from focusing on what we can't stand to focusing on what we stand for. What I'd like for

you to do is reflect on that. Take those two statements together, and what should we be guarding against at Waterford, and what should we be trying to promote here?

Higher-Order Thinking

And then the final reflection has to do with the content of our professional development time later, which is on higher-order questions. We had some higher-order thinking training earlier delivered by our staff members. So, implementing the higher-order thinking activities can improve student learning. But teachers report, however, that it is difficult to infuse higher-order questions “on the fly,” and therefore need to be planned ahead of time. So, I want you to, as you get to that and you get to this statement, reflect, respond to the statement one to another, and then the final question was how have you implemented higher-order activities into lessons this year? What did you find helpful? Was it difficult? Were there challenges? How did you implement it in the planning time?

The higher-order question component is going to lead into our next aspect of our staff meeting which is our professional development time with Mr. Frey who’s put together some more opportunity for us—or greater opportunity for us—to learn about higher-order thinking activities and questions. So, Mr. Frey, come on up.

William Frey: Just a reminder, there really is research to back up higher-order thinking activities and tasks, and we are actually thinking about making that the next instructional norm. How can we bring higher-order processes and thought into our classrooms? And I really think the more I have reflected on it, I think, talking to other teachers, and I think if you reflect on it as well, that’s really the best way to build concept—is by asking questions that really look at things from different angles. Has anyone ever had that experience where you are teaching something, and you teach it this one way and then on a test, they get it a different way and the students fail at it? They got it the way you taught it, but they see it from a different angle, and now they’re completely lost. I think that has a lot to do with the concept. It’s not really fully developed. So I think higher-order questions is a good way to develop it.

Teacher: The kids come up with different answers, and that sharpens their response because then they have to defend it. They are forced to defend it because if I say, “no, you are not responsible,” and my neighbor says, “yes, you are,” then you have to start defending.

Frey: Absolutely. And I come back to something constantly, which is why—my teachers would complain about when I was in high school—why can’t these students write an essay and defend it? If you really ask yourself that question, as a teacher, you say maybe it’s because they never really defend anything that they give an answer for. It’s always readily available in the book or right easy to find the answer. They don’t ever really have to work hard at defending. If you give them more opportunities and they are answering questions to defend their answer and to make explanations, I think that will help.